So-called ‘boutique’ amps offer a refined approach to accessing pure and uncluttered guitar tone, more often than not by the simplest and most direct route and usually accompanied by a price tag that reflects the many man hours, high level of technical skill and first-class components used in their construction. But what are the benefits of buying an expensive, hand-built guitar amp when there are any number of excellent mass-produced varieties available in the shops for a fraction of the cost? It’s kind of like the difference between a hand-built sports car like a Morgan and a mass-produced Mazda MX-5 – the Mazda is predictable, safe and maybe a bit dull. And while an MX-5 in your driveway is not to be sniffed at, which of the two do you think is going to turn the most heads?

If your motivation for wanting to own a boutique guitar rig is to kick out the kind of tones that make your fellow guitarists turn green with envy every time you turn on, plug in and rock out, Dr Z is always going to be well worth a look. These three valve amp heads from the American manufacturer represent three particularly nice examples of the company’s approach, which places the emphasis on simple yet ingeniously designed products with high-quality components and extremely impressive build quality.
**CAB FOR DR Z!**

**A CLOSER LOOK AT THE MATCHING CABINETS OFFERED FOR THESE amps**

While reviewing these amps, we also had the chance to check out two of the speaker cabinets that Dr Z manufactures. These cabinets look very similar, and both are priced at a relatively modest £399, but while one is equipped with a single 12-inch speaker, the other has two 10-inch speakers. The cabinets are built from high-quality Baltic birch ply and, like the amps, they’re available in a choice of black, red or blonde Tolex. The 1x12 is fitted with a single Celestion Vintage 30 speaker as standard, with Dr Z grounding his own custom 10-inch drivers for the 2x10 version. A removable section at the rear of both cabinets allows the user to choose between a closed or open-back configuration. The difference in sound between the two cabinets is hard to describe, but in a nutshell, the 2x10 probably has a slightly fatter attack than the 1x12, but it doesn’t give away anything away to the larger single speaker in terms of bottom and thump.

Either of these cabinets will provide an excellent sonic platform for any of these heads, and look pretty comfy sitting on your rig. And when it’s the point of having a noisy boutique head without a gorgeous matching cab to go with it?

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**FEATURES – MAZ 18 JR NR**

The MAZ 18 Jr is the offspring of an earlier Dr Z design, the MAZ-38, which has now been replaced by the MAZ 18 Jr. The MAZ 18 Jr is designed to offer similar performance in a lower-priced, more compact package. This 18-watt is powered by a pair of EL84 output valves, three 12AX7s in the preamp stage and, most interestingly, a G234 rectifier valve throbbing away in there as well. The valve-driver spring-wound of the regular MAZ 18 Jr, which costs around £200 more.

On the surface, all three amps seem very simple, which is indeed what they are, but don’t let the no-frills approach fool you. The tones on tap are neither primitive nor raw – there are multiple layers of great tone to discover here, brimming with subtlety and sophistication.

**SOUNDS – MAZ 18 JR NR**

This mini rig feels like it’s aimed squarely at the recording studio or smaller venues, but don’t be deceived, the MAZ 18 should have absolutely no problems being heard on its own. It’s a definite functional feel. Nothing definitely comes before form on the list of priorities. Functionally, this boutique amp is produced great tone. The tone on tap is a definite functional feel. Nothing definitely comes before form on the list of priorities. Functionally, this boutique amp is brimming with subtlety and sophistication.

However, it isn’t just the sheer output that impresses – the big surprise is the way this amp manages to sound uncannily like a small Fender tube amp, despite using EL84s (as found in the Vox AC30) rather than the 6L6 or 6L6 output tubes that you’d usually expect to find in a Fender. The Fender-like quality comes from the MAZ-18’s rich, fulsome voice, which positively drips with musical-sounding second- and third-order harmonics. You don’t even need to crank the volume up particularly high to make yourself heard, either. Obviously, how loud you need to play will depend on your overall musical environment, but as a rule of thumb, you shouldn’t find yourself needing to mix up the MAZ 18 unless you’re playing in a large hall or a theatre. In a small club or the back room of your local boozer, the MAZ 18 should have absolutely no problems being heard on its own.

To test the amp we used a trusty US-made Fender Telecaster fitted with a medium-output Stratocaster neck pickup and a moody-sounding Bare Knuckle boss bridge pickup. This combination offers a nice palette of chunky rhythm and biting lead tones. Thanks to the MAZ 18, the Strat neck pickup has never sounded so sweet. The bass is tight and punchy and the mids sound smooth without being overly slick. The single-cuit naturally gnarled edges take on the character and warmth of an old oaken table – well worn but never ugly. The same could be said of the bridge pickup. Tele bridge pickups can be notoriously undemanding, but the MAZ highlights the Telecaster’s rugged stripped-for-action raunch, allowing the player to dial in a wide spectrum of top Tele tones from Keef to Quo. The highs sparkle and the low mids punch you straight in the guts!

**BACK TO BASICS**

**FOR FANS OF THE NO-FRILLS APPROACH**

While all three Dr Z heads are impeccably constructed and neatly finished, they have a definite functional feel. As handsome as they are, you get what you pay for. All three heads are made with the utmost detail and craftsmanship, with Dr Z providing its own custom 10-inch drivers for the matching cabinets that are offered for these amps. While the MAZ 18 Jr NR has a fully painted and printed back panel, the other two amps are verging on the austere. Who needs printed text to show off the location of the jack sockets when a strip of tape stuck on the unfinished metal of the chassis is all you get? A real sense of the amp being heavily Loved is created in some electronics buff’s lair.
FEATURES – CARMEN GHIA

The Carmen Ghia is another 18-watt head powered by a pair of EL84 power tubes, but this little amp is a far simpler affair. Like the MAZ 18, the Carmen Ghia’s front panel features a lone power switch, but the main tone-shaping equipment is restricted to a pair of rotary controls for volume and tone, the argument presumably being that you don’t need any more than this and your guitar’s volume pot to alter the amp’s timbre and dig out the tones of your dreams.

The amp’s rear panel features a Euro-friendly IEC mains inlet (aka a female three-pin ‘kettle-style’ socket) and separate output jacks for 8- and 4-ohm extension speakers. A large baton running across the back protects those vulnerable valves from unwelcome intrusion by foreign objects, while gaps either side allow cooling air to reach them.

GBOPINION

DR Z MAZ 18 JR NR
GOLD STARS
- Tone, tone and more luscious tone
- Great build quality
- Gain control adds versatility
BLACK MARKS
- None
IDEAL FOR...
Blues, jazz, country or trad rock – a great range of tones

“THE CARMEN GHIA IS THE IDEAL WEAPON FOR A PROPER OLD-SCHOOL BLUES PLAYER”

Of course, the whole thing is beautifully constructed and finished to a very high standard, but there are virtually no frills – everything is there to serve a purpose and do its job.

SOUNDS – CARMEN GHIA

The Carmen Ghia sounds like an altogether different beast to the MAZ 18. The Ghia seems to have more mid-range grunt than the MAZ, but is still almost as harmonically complex. This is the very same model as used by top American blues guitarist Buddy Whittington (the current lead guitarist with John Mayall & the Bluesbreakers) and you quickly appreciate why this Start player favours this amp.

With the tone pot turned anti-clockwise past the 12 o’clock point, the Ghia has a glassy shimmer that begins to take on a darker, more hairy-sounding growl once the tone control is cranked clockwise. The darker tone doesn’t muffle the guitar sound at all – it just seems to add a soupçon of extra mid-range muscle while coating everything in a warm, velvety halo.

Cranking up the volume until the output valves begin to clip produces a mild but sweet and very useable distortion that cleans up beautifully when you turn the guitar’s volume pot down. One mild criticism is that even when left idle, there is a pronounced mains hum – not enough to ruin your night (it’s not noticeable when you’re playing) but if you are prone to be sensitive to such things it could begin to get on your nerves.

Without wishing to paint the Carmen Ghia into a corner, we’d say that this is the ideal weapon for a proper old-school blues player who really knows how to use a guitar and amplifier together as a single unit, balancing the timbre, gain and volume to create the tones that they want instead of relying on multiple channels to do basically the same job.

The mere thought of combining this amp and a vintage Gibson Les Paul Junior with a single P-90 pickup, tuned to an open chord and played with a big glass slide… just thinking about it is enough to make you go all wobbly at the knees!

FEATURES – ROUTE 66

Described as a “tweed amp on steroids” by a certain member of the British tone cognoscenti, the Route 66 is the most powerful amp of the Dr Z trio reviewed here, delivering around 32 watts. It’s powered by a pair of KT66 output tubes, which
Plug into any of these heads and immediately you’re tapped into a vast reservoir of rich, musical tones. And compared to many of their hand-wired US counterparts, the prices are extremely competitive.

The MAZ 18 Jr NR is the most sophisticated of the three, but even this amp is relatively light on features by modern standards. Each of these heads offers a direct route to awesome tone, and they’re perfect for players who like to control their sound the old-fashioned way – with their pick, their fingers and the guitar’s volume control. The Carmen Ghia is perfect for blues players, while the Route 66, with its fat, dynamic tone and extra headroom, could prove more versatile than you might think with a few good overdrive pedals. The MAZ 18, with its uncanny ability to channel elements of both classic Fender and Marshall sounds, is a cracking amp for the studio or stage. With excellent sounds and build quality, these Dr Zs look like a worthwhile investment.

A TRIO OF TONE TITANS

**DR Z MAZ 18 JR NR, CARMEN GHIA & ROUTE 66**

**GBREVIEW AMPLIFIERS**

**GBOPINION**

**DR Z CARMEN GHIA**

**GOLD STARS**

- A no-nonsense monster of tone
- Great build quality
- Superb feel and sensitivity

**BLAKE MARKS**

- More background hum than we’d like

**IDEAL FOR...**

Old-fashioned blues and rock players who like to just plug in and play

**GBOPINION**

**DR Z ROUTE 66**

**GOLD STARS**

- Sweet, blooming tone
- Great build quality
- Plenty of volume and headroom

**BLAKE MARKS**

- None

**IDEAL FOR...**

Blues, jazz and, with an overdrive pedal, any shade of rock ‘n’ roll

**GBOPINION**

**GBRATINGS**

**DR Z MAZ 18 JR NR, CARMEN GHIA & ROUTE 66**

**BUILD QUALITY**

**FEATURES**

**SOUNDS**

**VALUE FOR MONEY**

**GBOVERDIC**

**DETAILS**

SUPERB BOUTIQUE TONE AT A PRICE YOU JUST CAN’T ARGUE WITH

Unlike the other two amps, the MAZ 18 Jr NR features a master volume control.

Volume and tone controls are all it takes to wring fine tone from the Carmen Ghia.

The 1x12 cab has a Celestion vintage 30, while the 2x10 gets Dr Z custom speakers.

The rear panel features 16-, 8- and 4-ohm speaker outputs, and everything looks functional and almost home-made, in a simple, well-engineered sort of way. The front panel control knobs are the only slight let-down – compared with the sexy off-white plastic knobs on the other two heads, the rough steel dials used on the Route 66 don’t have quite the same appeal.

**SOUNDS – ROUTE 66**

The great thing about KT66s is how they make the sound of the guitar ‘bloom’. Turn up the volume and the guitar doesn’t distort or overdrive in the traditional sense. Rather, the sound becomes increasingly fatter and more dynamic. Winding both tone controls to the max increases the overall gain and volume, but due to the amp’s ability to retain clean-ish headroom at fairly loud volumes, you’d be advised to cart along a good overdrive pedal to goose up the front end a bit – for solos, say.

We used a Pro-Co Rat pedal with the Route 66 and the amp coped equally well with the pedal set to full-on fuzz mayhem or wound back for a smoother, softer overdrive. The bass end remains tight and focussed and the top end really sings, with excellent note definition and articulation across every string.